Northern Kentucky University
Institutional Plan for Adult Learners

Prepared for the Council for Postsecondary Education
June 1, 2009

Northern Kentucky University (NKU) learned much about its friendliness toward adult learners in 2008-09 through the Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative (KALI). While the institution has many strengths to offer adult students, many improvements can be made, too. The following plan reflects the recommendations of the NKU Adult Learner Initiative task team based on information gleaned from the Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) assessment conducted in 2008-09. Further, the findings of the KALI work groups convened by the Council for Postsecondary Education informed this plan with regard to financial assistance, flexible academic programming and credit for prior learning. This plan outlines five broad categories to be addressed in 2009-10: financial aid for adult learners, flexible academic programming, credit for prior learning, campus climate, and other issues related to adult learners.

I.   **Financial Aid for Adult Learners**

Current financial aid programs for adult learners. In 2008-09, NKU learned the value of offering scholarships, even nominal ones, to adults. Through Project Graduate, NKU has offered $250 per semester to returning adult students with high hours (90+) but no degree. This has proven to be a significant motivator in spurring adults to re-enroll. The NKU Adult Learner task team extended this scholarship to current adult students for summer 2009 and received similar results. In fact, more than 75 adult students applied for 20-$250 scholarships for summer within 12 hours after the scholarships were announced.

In addition to KALI scholarships, NKU has also established partnerships with several employers to provide funding to adult learners. Through these partnerships, the employers pay NKU directly for tuition and fees associated with academic programs

delivered onsite or online for cohort groups of employees. For example, NKU delivers a bachelor completion degree in health science to respiratory care therapists at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) through a direct-bill relationship. Employees participating in the program sign a work agreement with CCHMC in exchange for this investment in their futures. Currently, NKU has four such agreements with employers. These agreements are mutually beneficial to NKU, the employees, and the employers.

Apart from the KALI-funded scholarships and employer partnerships, however, no institutional aid is earmarked for the adult student at NKU. This made sense in past years when tuition was relatively inexpensive and most medium to large employers offered tuition reimbursement plans. But tuition increases have out-paced economic growth over the past decade, and many employers have curtailed or abandoned tuition reimbursement plans in the wake of the current economic crisis, leaving adults little beyond personal resources and loans to pay for college. A recent Eduventures[1] survey of prospective adult students found that many adults are hesitant to take out loans and are planning instead to postpone or slow down their enrollment in 2009-10. Thus the importance of institutional aid is heightened for 2009-10.

2009-10 goals for financial aid for adult learners. The goal for financial aid for adult learners can best be summed in one word: More. The Adult Learner Initiative task team is committed to finding and expanding funding opportunities for adults to return to or continue their studies at NKU. The university will continue to explore opportunities for partnerships with employers, using results from the CCHMC relationship as a guide.

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[1] Eduventures (2009). The economy's impact on adult-learners enrollment decision-making process. Webinar presented May 5, 2009.

Also, a significant portion of the 2009-10 KALI grant monies will be earmarked for student scholarships. To reach as many adult learners as possible, award amounts will be kept low ($250 per term) and the task team will serve as the scholarship committee. Priority will be given to students nearing graduation.

II. Flexible Academic Programming

Current programming options for adults. In fall 2005, NKU introduced the Program for Adult-Centered Education (PACE). PACE is a structured, intensive program for working adult students. It operates on eight-week enrollment sessions and allows students to attend class one time per week per course. Through PACE, adults can complete a bachelor degree in four years, even with little or no previous college. Response to PACE has been outstanding with enrollment growing rapidly. In spring 2009, PACE headcount were 226 students with total (duplicated) enrollment of 693. More importantly, spring 2009 marked the end of the fourth academic year for PACE and the first cohort of students completed their studies. Twenty-six proud PACE students graduated on May 9, 2009. For many of them, this represented the culmination of a lifelong pursuit of their bachelor degree. The following testimony underscores the program's impact on helping adults achieve their dreams:

> It is not an understatement to say that I would have never graduated from college without PACE. I know myself better than anyone, and trying to schedule evening and weekend classes at some other school in pursuit of a Bachelor degree would have gotten very old very quickly… The PACE Program entered my life at just the right time. I was ready to correct mistakes that I had made in my past, and the program gave me the opportunity to do that without any unnecessary hassle. To

be sure, these past years have been difficult, but never unmanageable. I am emerging from this program a stronger and more responsible person, with greater focus than I ever had before. The notion that I am graduating tomorrow morning is one that I still cannot wrap my mind around. I just wanted to take some time to thank NKU for the PACE Program. Without it, I would still be languishing in regret and unsure of how to overcome it.

Other programs have adapted many elements of the PACE format, including the eight-week sessions and the hybrid mix of face-to-face and online teaching modalities. Specifically, the bachelor completion program in health sciences is offered in a modified PACE format as are many courses offered at the NKU Grant County Center. These flexible schedules work not only for students but also for faculty.

NKU also offers several undergraduate degrees in fully online formats. One degree can be completed entirely online, organizational leadership. Three other degrees are bachelor completion programs for associate-degreed students. They are registered nursing to bachelorette nursing (RN to BSN), health science, and construction management for surveyors. Also, a certificate program in business informatics is available online. A new program in library informatics will begin in fall 2009. These programs are targeted for the working adult student and provide much-needed flexibility.

2009-10 goals for increasing flexible programming for adult learners. Only a limited number of majors are available through flexible programming, and therefore a primary goal for 2009-10 is to identify additional degrees to offer in PACE and online formats. Students, faculty and employers need to be brought into conversations about degrees that may lend themselves to PACE and online delivery. Results for current

programs need to be tracked and analyzed to provide clear information about what works and what does not in current programs. National forecasts need to be scanned to help identify high-need degrees for the future. Ideally, at least two new undergraduate majors will be identified during the year and ready for enrollment in 2010-11.

In addition to degree development, NKU needs to build stronger relationships with Kentucky Community and Technical College campuses via articulations for online programs. In addition to working with the local KCTCS campus, Gateway CTC, more needs to be done to market online programs throughout the system. Two examples that demonstrate the opportunities that exist took place in the 2008-09 academic year. NKU will begin an online library informatics degree completion program in fall 2009. This program will be delivered in cooperation with Bluegrass CTC with some prerequisite courses provided by Bluegrass prior to admission to NKU. Further, two representatives from NKU Educational Outreach traveled to southeastern Kentucky in March to talk to respiratory care students about the online bachelor-completion degree program in health science. Mutually beneficial relationships like these need to be explored for other online programs.

III.   Credit for Prior Learning

Current prior learning policies. In theory, NKU offers a wide array of non-traditional avenues for adult students to get credit for their prior learning. CLEP (Collegiate Level Examination Program) tests are accepted in 22 subjects. Credit is awarded for military training. Students with training from business and industry may submit their transcripts for credit consideration under the American Council on Education (ACE) Registry of Credit Recommendations. Students in construction management and

career/technical education may be eligible for credit for prior vocational and National Occupational Competency Testing Institution work. Students with foreign language proficiency may take the WebCAPE placement test. Finally, NKU offers a portfolio program for prior learning assessment.

However, a limited number of students pursue non-traditional credit, and most academic departments do not accept it. The issues associated with each category of non-traditional credit options are outlined below. Table 1 summaries adult student participation in 2008-09.

CLEP examinations: Adults do take advantage of CLEP examinations; in fact, they received more credit via CLEP in 2008-09 than did traditional-aged students. Thirty adult students (aged 24+) received credit compared to only 17 traditional aged students. Adults complete them in a range of subjects but business-related tests (marketing, intro to business, etc.), history and English literature are the most prevalent. NKU only accepts 22 of 39 available tests and expanding the number of accepted tests is an important first step toward increasing credits earned by adults via CLEP. The most popular CLEP tests not accepted at NKU (as per CLEP's institutional representative) are American government, introduction to sociology, and information systems and computer applications.

Military credit: Thirty-four students received between four and 32 credits for military training in 2008-09. However, students receive general elective rather than course-specific credit for their military experience. Course-specific credit is more beneficial toward degree completion.

ACE-registry credit: Few academic departments entertain ACE recommendations. This is partly due to a lack of information about the ACE program and the rigor it represents. But many departments hold that their accrediting agencies do not permit credit through this and other non-traditional sources. More research is needed to determine if this is accurate. No credits were awarded in 2008-09 for ACE registry courses.

Vocational/NOCTI credit: The construction management and career/technical education programs award credit for some vocational training and also recognize courses completed through the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI). However, these are small academic programs so the impact is minimal. In the 2008-09 academic year, two students received credit through NOCTI.

WebCAPE: This program tests foreign-language competency. It allows them to prove their competency via a web-based proficiency test. Most adults, however, are too far removed from their formal language schooling to attempt this test. It tends to be more appropriate for traditional-aged students. Only one nontraditional student received credit this year.

Portfolio: NKU once had a robust portfolio program serving 25 to 30 students per year. Based on the national standards published by CAEL, the program allows students to document how they learned the content of specific courses through their work experience. In the past three years, two critical departments have decided to limit or stop their participation in portfolio. They are speech communication and criminal justice. Speech communication has expressed

concerns about rigor that need to be re-addressed. Criminal justice has indicated

their accrediting agency prohibits credit for portfolio or other non-traditional

methods. This also needs to be explored in more detail. Currently, most portfolios

are completed by students pursuing the organizational leadership degree, although

in 2008-09 one nursing student completed a 3-credit portfolio in nursing and one

student received three credits for English 291 via portfolio. In total, three students

were awarded portfolio credit in the 2008-09 academic year, through spring 2009.

Table 1: Nontraditional credit awarded by type, 2008-09

Program	Total students receiving credit	Adult students receiving credit
CLEP	37	20
ACE-registry recommendations	0	0
Military credit	34	34
Vocational/NOCTI	2	2
WebCAPE	14	1
Portfolio	3	3

2009-10 goals concerning credit for prior learning. Efforts will be focused on

two primary areas: revitalizing portfolio and improving military-transfer policies. Both

will require consistent and persistent education to deans, department chairs and faculty

about the value of expanded participation by academic departments. With regard to

portfolio, the Adult Learner Initiative task team plans to identify key departments and

work through the department chair to determine if portfolio can be a viable option for

some courses. The task team also intends to host a variety of training opportunities for

department chairs and faculty to explain in detail how the program works. The team also

recommends earmarking KALI funding to sponsor faculty and staff participation in

national conferences regarding portfolio and other non-traditional credit opportunities. The goal is to highlight the rigor inherent in NKU's approach to portfolio learning and other policies for awarding nontraditional credit. Another goal related to portfolio concerns the portfolio development class, which is required for students completing portfolios. This course needs to be converted in to a web-based course that can be started anytime during the year. This will make it easier for students to pursue credit via portfolio.

With regard to military, NKU recently formed a Veterans Advocate Committee. The committee is charged with making NKU a more welcoming environment for students with military experience. The Adult Learner Initiative task team will address the limitations of current transfer policies through this committee. Further, the task team will conduct a competitive analysis of state and local institutions to identify deficiencies in NKU policies. Finally, institutional CLEP policies directly impact military students as they are able to CLEP tests for free on military bases. Expanding the number of CLEP tests accepted is an important goal for 2009-10. Similarly, NKU needs to explore DSST tests, which are military-sponsored standardized tests not accepted at NKU at this time.

IV.   **Campus Climate**

Current climate regarding adult learners. NKU has a long served a non-traditional student population and remains primarily a commuter college. Because of this, adult learners do tend to "fit in" to the campus and many departments recognize their unique needs. For example, NKU developed a One-Stop Center using personnel from registrar, bursar and financial assistance to provide quick answers to most questions. Also, many service offices (registrar, bursar, financial assistance, student support

services, and educational outreach) offer evening hours at least weekly and more frequently during peak enrollment times. With the opening of the new Student Union, limited food services (and coffee!) are now available until 6:30 p.m. Further, more and more services are available online, affording around-the-clock access for students. As addressed earlier, the university does offer PACE and online programs that are convenient for working adults. About 20 majors are available through evening and weekend enrollment. All of these are positive indicators about the climate for adult learners at NKU.

However, the Institutional Self Assessment completed last fall as part of the ALFI clearly revealed that adult learners are not a priority at NKU. In fact, in the past decade, as additional residential facilities have been acquired and admission standards have increased, more emphasis has been placed on the traditional student. This emphasis has been good in that it has resulted in many new facilities and services at NKU. But the time is ripe to focus on adult learners with daunting enrollment goals facing NKU through 2020 and a declining population of traditional-aged students in Kentucky.

2009-10 goals for changing the campus climate. Perhaps the greatest allies in changing the campus climate are adult students themselves. Adults tend to think of themselves as "customers" and as such have high expectations. They can and will articulate their needs and are clear about what they think. NKU needs to harness their feedback by consistently asking adult learners to evaluate programs and services. Results must be widely distributed and discussed.

As with credit for nontraditional learning, education about the needs of adult learners is needed at NKU. The Adult Learner Initiative task team is committed to

providing ongoing trainings about adult learners at NKU throughout 2009-10. Both formal and informal education will be offered.

Further, more internal and external publicity about adult learners at NKU is needed. Project Graduate and PACE have offered opportunities for press coverage in recent years and both will continue to offer unique stories. There are adult students throughout the university, however, who have amazing stories to tell about their determination to finish their degrees. The task team needs to flush out these stories and highlight them throughout the year.

The biggest thing that can be done to change the climate, however, is to provide more adult-friendly degree programs. As the numbers of adults increase so too will the understanding of and commitment to addressing their unique needs.

V.   Other Issues Related to Adult Learners

Through the ALFI assessment, NKU identified a need not yet addressed in this plan and that is the need to provide more career-exploration services to adults. The services offered by the NKU Office of Career Planning and Placement are primarily geared toward the entry-level worker. The office does provide resume preparation services to adults and will provide individual consultations upon request. But one of the most frequently asked questions by adult learners is: "What jobs will I be able to get with this degree?" The Adult Learner Initiative task team recommends the development of a series of career exploration tutorials for the adults. These online modules would highlight opportunities available in the workplace and walk students through the process of re-tooling for a new career. Mostly, the modules would encourage and inspire adults to persist in their educational goals, focusing on stories of successful adult graduates who

have changed their lives and their occupations by returning to school. This project will be proposed for funding using 2009-10 KALI funding.

VI.   Conclusion

There is much NKU can do to become more adult friendly, and the funding available through the KALI grant will help move many initiatives forward in 2009-10. The following goals are the top five priorities and are detailed in the ALI proposal that accompanies this plan:

1.   Expand adult learner scholarships with priority given to adults nearing graduation;

2.   Working with department chairs and program coordinators, identify two additional majors that may be appropriate for delivery in PACE and/or online formats;

3.   Revamp the portfolio program. Develop the portfolio course into an online format, and educate academic departments about the value of portfolio credit;

4.   Focus on returning military personnel through the Veterans Advocacy Committee and address transfer policies regarding military training and CLEP tests;

5.   Develop an online career explorations module for adult learners.